

Hot Docs Highlights

By [Joe Pack](#), Contributor | May 8, 2014 | Last Updated: May 8, 2014 3:43 am



The Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, the largest annual documentary festival in North America, wrapped up in Toronto on May 4 having shown 197 films. Here, we review two of our favourites screened during the 10-day festival: "Focus on Infinity" and "The Condemned."

A Tale of the Infinite

Noticeable in the expansive landscapes shown in the film "Focus on Infinity" is the almost complete absence of human subjects.

Director Joerg Burger's contribution to this year's Hot Docs comes out of Austria and spans Chile, Nevada, Armenia, Arizona and beyond, yet very few people populate the screen. It is a rumination on the origins of life, the overlap in science and religion, and the pursuit of knowledge and meaning.

If you think that is a mouthful, Burger deliberately gives the film a snail's pace—perfect for a project that drops ideas on its audience like ACME anvils, with long, pregnant pauses that allow viewers to recover from the impact.

Two related but opposed quotes from the film give a framework to the director's intentions:

"Our (old) reason to exist doesn't exist any more ... I exist because I want to know."

For some, the satisfaction from merely surviving has been outgrown. The pursuit of knowledge has given people a new purpose.

"I'm not just made to know, I'm made to seek meaning."

Some are tired of the dogged pursuit of science, which results in wanting more and more, faster and faster. Meaning, religious or otherwise, is the pursuit of those who see the irony in finding answers to rhetorical questions.

Investigating telescope technology, UFO mythology, and the Vatican's interest in space exploration, the film clearly aims high with its queries on life, the universe, and everything.

Burger's style, while including brief face-to-face interviews with physicists, writers, and one former director of the Vatican Observatory, is to place voice-over narrative on top of the flat terrains the earthbound film observes with the deeply focused cameras focusing, as photographers and videographers would say, on infinity.

With the cameras travelling different parts of the globe, searching for questions without answers, one can't help but compare the sparse settings and infrequent subjects (a few people, some animals) to Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey." Shots of tall land masses and seas of satellite dishes stand in for monoliths with only the curious apes missing, replaced by scientists and engineers.

Or perhaps the slow pacing and long stretches of silence remind you more of Kubrick's "The Shining," each disturbing or enticing message gripping the viewer while the camera tortures with its long, uninterrupted gaze. One can almost hear Bela Bartok's score underneath.

If scientists want more, faster, "Focus on Infinity" slows our digestion of this conversation to allow us to gain perspective of the most complex of questions. As a Toronto-based sports radio host recently said, talk radio is largely for background noise on the commute to and from work. What grabs the listener's attention, he said, is silence. Silence pervades "Focus on Infinity," perhaps the only way to quiet the viewers' mind and hold its attention. Silence speaks volumes.

Any mention of religion in the film serves not to criticize its aging perspective but to find syntheses with the sciences in order to decide which is more valuable: knowledge or meaning.

As much as "Focus on Infinity" invites viewers to embrace discovery, it just as brilliantly discusses the fatigue inherent in asking the questions that have and may forever stump humankind.

Asli Erdogan, a writer and physicist who has distanced herself from the scientific community because of its sometimes "obsessive" nature, makes the most eye-opening of statements:

"I want to learn how to die," she said in the film.

Not to be confused with nihilism, Erdogan illustrates for us that sometimes finding the limits of human knowledge and turning backward is just as acceptable as pushing forward; that the relentless nature of science leaves obsessive and dissatisfied people in its wake.

Burger balances the backward and forward push of scientific and philosophical discovery while leaving the visual and aural landscapes open for viewers to inhabit. If you aren't looking for answers though, you won't leave the theatre dissatisfied.

A Hard Look at Hard Time in Russia

Like underwater scenes in movies, a prison documentary may get you holding your breath. Nick Read's "The Condemned" looks to succeed while allowing an unusual amount of breathing room.

The film ventures inside a Russian prison containing 260 criminals with the most severe sentences and tells both the story of state and self-imprisonment.

Surrounded by a forest "the size of Germany," Penal Colony 56 is seven hours away from the nearest city and is a 60-hour round trip for one visiting family member. Director Nick Read does little in terms of projecting his own voice upon the film, relying entirely on individual interviews and subject profiles.

The feeling of isolation amongst the inmates in the cells is staggering but the immensity and meaning of the forest remains an underdeveloped character and a lost opportunity for the film. We learn what is unique to the inside of the prison but not the outside. The prison camp in the 1963 film "The Great